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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies barriers to grade level curriculum planning by teachers at Gwin Oaks Elementary School, Lawrenceville, Georgia, and discusses steps in implementing a program in which classroom teachers in groups worked to solve educational problems. Obstacles limiting teacher involvement in decision-making were (1) too little time for teachers to discuss numerous school matters; (2) absence of leadership at each grade level; (3) lack of communication with parents about what was being taught; and (4) lack of ability to coordinate planning by support staff with planning by classroom teachers. These problems were addressed directly in an intervention program. Teachers at each grade level were given an afternoon of release time every 6 weeks. Each group elected a chairperson to lead planning activities and, during planning sessions, wrote a letter to parents explaining the subject areas to be presented to and learned by their children. Teachers also suggested ways parents could help their children learn at home. Additionally, support staff (art, music, and physical education teachers; a media specialist; and a counselor) coordinated activities with each curriculum group's plan. (RH)

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GRADE LEVEL SIX WEEKS PLANNING----A MUST FOR ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

by

Beverly J. Dryden

One of the grade level chairmen at Gwin Oaks Elementary was having second thoughts about the half day curriculum planning session I had set for him and the teachers at his grade level. In fact, all the teachers at his grade level were concerned about this plan. "We don't know how we can be expected to do more than we are doing now," they reported. "You want us to plan curriculum and also report this planning to parents. I don't think parents really care and besides, it just takes more of our already limited time."

There were problems with teachers at Gwin Oaks School sharing the responsibility for locating and solving problems in instructional and curriculum matters. Teachers saw little need to focus on improving curriculum and instruction. It wasn't that they didn't believe improvements were needed, but they felt the system had dictated curriculum matters and they really had very little choice in making any decisions that affected the school's educational program. "What good would it do for us to plan together?" they asked. "Wouldn't it limit our creativeness and the ability to teach what we as individuals think important?" asked several teachers. The general feeling by many professionals on the staff was that the half day, released time, curriculum planning session that I had arranged for each grade level each six weeks would be of little value. It would result in more paperwork with very little benefit to either teachers or students.

But I was looking at these planning sessions from a different viewpoint. As I looked at the school, I knew there was little emphasis placed on locating and solving educational problems. The difference was that I

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believed teachers could make decisions about what, when, and how to teach the subjects for which they were responsible. I believed that these decisions could best be handled by teamwork and not by teachers closing their minds and doors to the problems.

Problems inherent in the system that made it difficult for locating and solving problems were:

1. too little time for teachers to discuss all matters of the school. Grade level meetings were held in the mornings before the children arrived. Emphasis at these meetings was on daily routine maintenance and operational problems such as noise in the halls and cafeteria, schedules, and cleanliness of classrooms. After talking about these problems, little time was left for discussing the most important issues, that of studying, solving, and evaluating the educational problems within a school. The daily routine maintenance and operational problems of the school were always the problem of the administrator. No one ever expressed a curriculum or instructional problem to the principal except to ask for materials. People, coming up against a problem, reacted by picking it up and taking it to the principal in its raw state: "Boss, what can you do about this?" No one wanted to go one step further and provide a solution.
2. absence of leadership at each grade level. Very few grade level chairmen had the training to maneuver through agendas, keep people on track, finesse points of substance, discourage digressions, and reach consensus on what, how, when to teach and what to evaluate.

3. lack of communication to the parents about what was being taught each six weeks. Parents were not aware of the objectives to be reached during this time frame. They only received the grades that reflected what was learned.
4. being unable to coordinate the support staffs' planning of activities for students with that of the classroom teachers' activities. Art, music, and physical education teachers and the media specialists were doing "their own thing" with the children. The special education teachers were also providing activities for children without planning with the classroom teachers.

I wanted to implement a procedure that would bring back decision making in curriculum and instruction to the person most directly related to the education of children, the classroom teacher. I wanted to establish a procedure in which the needs and views of classroom teachers were being heard and taken into consideration. I wanted an opportunity for teachers to work in organized teams to solve curriculum problems and be able to make decisions for improvement through teamwork.

The first step in implementing a procedure in which this teamwork could occur was to provide ample time within the school day for teachers at each grade level to plan together in order to provide an educational program that would best meet the needs of their children. This released time said to the teacher, "You are worthy of having school time to plan with your peers and your principal."

Planning sessions were divided into six weeks increments of time. Since report cards were sent home every six weeks, this time frame seemed a logical way to plan. Teachers could easily plan for a six weeks block of time in

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each curriculum area, carry out the plans, then evaluate that six weeks at the following six weeks session. They could evaluate what worked well and what improvements were needed.

In addition to the six weeks planning time frame, there was a need for teachers at each grade level to focus on a yearly grade level curriculum or instructional goal that members of that grade level would work on together. The goal was agreed upon by members of that grade level and worked on during the year. Examples of goals that teachers at different grade levels worked on were: developing consistency in evaluation procedures in math, language, and social studies. One grade level worked as a team to improve the students' composition skills. Another grade level correlated the science program with media materials and developed units of study in the science program so that information would be better organized. Grade level goals usually complemented the school wide goals, which focused on improvement of two subject areas during the year.

Staff development money was used to provide substitutes for teachers. Teachers met during the afternoon for four hours to plan. For three times during the year, substitutes were hired when each grade level met. During the other times, teachers were able to plan during teacher workdays which took place at the end of each quarter. Substitutes were hired for planning for the second, fourth, and sixth six weeks. The first six weeks planning took place during pre-planning week. However, many grade levels came on their own time to plan.

People were worried about taking the teacher away from the classroom for three half days. These half days have paid off in higher achievement scores plus maintaining consistency among teachers in carrying out objectives of the different subject areas. The school now has a definite direction and

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during these meetings learning and teaching have become the chief priority.

"Every teacher at every school should have this kind of opportunity," voiced a seasoned first grade teacher. "Even though I've had 15 years experience, it means a great deal to sit down with my peers and plan for our students. It is especially helpful to new teachers to the school and for first year teachers. No other experience, whether it be from the principal, instructional lead teacher, or system level person can take the place of these planning sessions."

The second step in implementing this procedure was to see that each grade level had a chairman who could lead the group into productivity. Prior to the establishment of grade level team planning sessions, a leadership group was formed which represented each grade level, the special education and support staff. This group was trained in conducting productive meetings, resolving conflicts, encouraging people to participate and were charged with providing a process for sharing ideas and reaching consensus on educational matters. Teachers were concerned about the selection process of the chairperson. The selection process was left up to each grade level and the chairman remained in that position for as long as the group wanted. As an administrator, I felt that I had to have faith and trust in the teachers to make that decision. However, if a chairman was not able to get the group to function in a productive way, I intervened and changes were made, either in the selection of a new chairman or involving the particular group in learning how to function better as a group.

My role and the instructional lead teacher's role was to be at each planning session and to act as facilitators to help teachers carry out their plans. In addition, school wide curriculum problems were addressed.

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It is necessary for the administrative team to be at these meetings and to be a part of the most important matters of the school---the educational program for children.

Informing parents about what to expect each six weeks was another important step in this procedure. During these planning sessions, teachers at each grade level wrote a letter to parents explaining the subject areas to be presented and learned. They also gave parents ways in which they could help their children at home. One recent example of this was the information sent home to parents of first grade children. First grade teachers wrote....

Math instruction for this grading period will continue to concentrate on solving problems with sums and differences through ten. We will also introduce the children to place value through "groupings by tens." This instruction will prepare them for solving two digit addition and subtraction problems. In our unit on place value, the children will apply their understanding in counting activities using numerals from 1 to 99.. It will also be our goal for children to be able to correctly write in order and count orally from 1 to 99. We will continue to concentrate on mastery of the basic addition and subtraction facts through 10. Please continue to reinforce this area with practice at home.

You can do many activities to reinforce the learning that occurs at school with your child. An important "homework" assignment each day is to review the papers and activities which your child completes at school. Another daily task is to have your child read aloud to you for a few minutes each day. It is also helpful to work on a few of the words from the weekly spelling list each evening. Having a practice test on Thursday night is

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is an excellent way to prepare for the test given each Friday. Teachers of first grade children also informed the parents of the other subject areas to be presented and learned.

Another major focus was to have the activities the support staff: art, music, physical education teachers, media specialist and the counselor correlate with that of each grade level's plan. Sometimes this was not possible, but generally activities that complemented the foucs of the particular six weeks were implemented by the support staff. Music and art activities generally correlated with units of study in social studies and media activities correlated with types of literature children were reading in class. The major focus was to plan activities that enriched the basic curriculum. Special education teachers also follow the letter teachers write to parents to help them know the objectives to be reached. They also plan with the teachers who have special education students.

Research confirms the faith of those who believe that no improvement in the quality of schooling is likely unless the people in individual schools in concert with the parents and children they serve, agree on what they want to accomplish. According to Smith and Tucker, (1977) the school climate must provide stimulating ideas and facilitate the exchange of ideas with colleagues. Teachers must have the opportunity to work together over time to achieve common objectives and not least important have the sense that they are sufficiently free of administrative intervention that it is worth investing time and energy in the effort to improve the education offered in their school. When the teachers and other school personnel feel successful about education in their school, children also believe they can achieve and they do. Teachers at Gwin

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Oaks Elementary now concentrate on improving the quality of education for the students they serve. They have been able to do this because I believed in bringing back decision making in curriculum and instruction to the persons most directly related to the education of children, the classroom teachers. Through setting up a structure that provided leadership and teamwork, teachers have developed a sense of ownership and a responsibility in locating and solving educational problems at their school.

Smith, M. and M. Tucker. A Research Perspective on Educational Improvement. Washington, D.C.: USOE/HEW, October 1977.

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